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SALE AND USE OF POISON.

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For more than a year corrosive mercuric chloride has had the undesirable distinction of being one of the most commonly used poisons for self-destruction because of the fact that it was the most frequently mentioned and the most actively discussed of all the available toxic substances. It is probable that no one article of a poisonous nature ever attracted greater attention than was accorded to corrosive mercuric chloride in the daily papers of this country during the past year. The number of measures that were proposed in the lawmaking bodies of our cities, States, and Nation to restrict its sale and use would run well into three figures.

So far as is known, however, only two of the larger communities have, up to the present time, enacted restrictive legislation—the State of Maryland and the city of New York.

Even a cursory study of the available statistics concerning the nature and kind of poison used in cases of accidental or intentional self-poisoning will suggest the futility of legislation directed against the possible abuse of any one given substance. The appended tables, compiled from the report of the Registrar-General of Births, Deaths, and Marriages in England and Wales for 1911 and 1912, and from the annual reports made by the coroner of the city of St. Louis for the years 1911 to 1914, inclusive, will suffice to show that while no satisfactory conclusions can be drawn from the figures at hand, enough is evidenced to indicate that corrosive mercuric chloride is by no means the most readily available nor the most dangerously potent substance that may be used by persons intent on committing suicide.

Psychologists have long since recognized the part that imitation plays in the duplication or the possible increase of criminal acts, and the table compiled from the annual reports of the coroner of the city of St. Louis emphasizes more strongly than can be expressed in words the unfortunate effect of newspaper publicity regarding the nature and kind of poison used for self-destruction.

Table showing the deaths by poisoning reported for 1911 and 1912 by the Registrar-General of Births, Deaths, and Marriages in England and Wales.[1]

Name of poison.	1911					1912				
	Accidental deaths.		Suicides.		Total.	Accidental deaths.		Suicides.		Total.
	Male.	Female.	Male.	Female.		Male.	Female.	Male.	Female.	
Aectic acid			1	1	2	3	1			4
Alcohol	2				2	9	1		1	11
Ammonia	7	7	1	7	22	6	3	6	14	29
Arsenic	1	2	4	1	8	3	4	3	1	11
Belladonna	1	3		1	5	3	2	4	1	10
Camphor and its preparations	1	1	2		4	2	1	1		4
Carbolic acid	6	4	32	57	99	11	6	41	47	105
Chloral hydrate	2		1		3	3	1			4
Chlorodyne	1	3	1	1	6	2	3			5
Chloroform		1	1		2	1		4		5
Cocaine			1		1	1	1	1		3
Hydrochloric acid	19	7	43	30	99	7	1	45	41	94
Hydrocyanic acid	3		22	2	27	1		34	2	37
Lysol			1	2	3	1	1		2	4
Mercuric chloride	2		3	2	7		3	3	7	13
Nitric acid			1	3	4	1	2	2	1	6
Opium, laudanum, and morphine	41	17	37	11	106	32	16	42	10	100
Phosphorus	1	1	1	7	10	2	3	3	6	14
Potassium cyanide	5		33	3	41	4		38	3	45
Strychnine	1	3	7	6	17	4		7	4	15
Sulphuric acid	3		4	1	8	5			1	6
Sulphonal	2				2	1	4		1	6
Trional							3			3
Veronal	8	9		2	19	9	3	1	1	14
Other poisons	37	38	101	71	247	37	17	92	77	223
Total	143	96	297	208	744	148	76	327	220	771

Table showing the number of cases of accidental poisoning and of suicide by poisoning, reported by the coroner of St. Louis for the years 1911 to 1914, inclusive.[2]

	Accidental poisoning.					Suicide by poisoning.				
	1911	1912	1913	1914	Total.	1911	1912	1913	1914	Total.
Arsenic				1	1	2	3	3	4	12
Mercuric chloride	1	1	1		3	1	4	3	12	20
Phenol (carbolic acid)	5	2	1	1	9	85	120	119	85	409
Bromidia				1	1					
Potassium cyanide			1		1	5	1	3	7	16
Chloroform	1	1			2		3	1	2	6
Carbon monoxide	10	14	14	3	41	22	10	27	23	82
Chloral hydrate				1	1					
Cocaine		1		2	3					
Formaldehyde									1	1
Hydrocyanic acid			1		1	2	1	1	3	7
Laudanum							1	1		2
Morphine	1	1	2		4	1		1	4	6
Opium		1		1	2			1		1
Muriatic acid							2		3	5
Oxalic acid							3			3
Oil of cedar			1		1					
Phosphorus						1				1
Ptomain			4		4					
Picrotoxin				1	1					
Strychnine		1	1	1	3	1	1	1	2	5
Sulphuric acid								1		1
Sodium nitrate			1		1					
Wood alcohol						1	1	1		3
Total	18	22	27	12	79	121	150	163	146	580

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[1] Compiled from Pharm. J. Lond. 1913, v. 91, p. 455; 1914, v. 93, p. 3.

[2] J. Am. M. Assn. 1914, v. 63, p. 600.

The number of cases of suicide in the city of St. Louis from the use of corrosive mercuric chloride for the year ended March 31, 1914, is out of all proportion to what might have been expected under normal conditions. The period of time is practically coincident with that during which newspapers of the country gave unusual publicity to the use of this substance as a poison, so that it seems quite probable that the increase is due to suggestions offered the morbidly inclined by the suicide items in the local papers.

The figures given are further emphasized by the fact that, compared with the population of England and Wales, the suicides reported in St. Louis from this one substance alone would aggregate a total of 600 cases, while if the same ratio held true of the total population of the United States, the aggregate number of suicides from corrosive mercuric chloride during the past year would number nearly 1,600.

It is generally recognized that the underlying object of legislation to control the sale and use of poisons is the protection of the public. It is practically impossible to make poison regulations foolproof, and it is also admittedly impracticable to dissuade the person bent on self-destruction from accomplishing his end. Easy access to poisons greatly increases their abuse, and it is difficult indeed to conceive of ways and means that will tend to prevent or even discourage the constantly growing abuse of poisonous substances.

A consistent and persistent enforcement of existing laws to restrict the sale of poisons should go far toward making the enactment of additional special laws unnecessary. The difficulties encountered in this direction, however, are evidenced by the fact that even at the present time some of the States have two or more laws restricting the sale and use of poisons which overlap in part, either in scope or in the nature of their enforcement, and usually differ sufficiently to make compliance with all the laws impracticable, if not impossible.

This conflict in the nature as well as the scope of the laws relating to poisons in the several States and even in the same State is unnecessary, and the opinion has frequently been expressed that a Federal or National poison law would lead to a better understanding of the problem and to a more efficient enforcement of the laws in all of the States. It has also been pointed out that the existing discrimination between the sale of a poison as a drug and the sale of the same article for mechanical or other purposes fosters a disregard of the law on the part of the druggist and leads to noncompliance with its requirements.

A national poison law on which food and drug officials, the postal officials, the producer, the dealer, and the consumer alike could rely would go far toward bringing about effective methods for controlling the sale and use of poisons and of poisonous drugs in all parts of the country. Such a law would also afford dealers doing an interstate business an opportunity to determine with reasonable certainty whether any particular article should be handled as a poison or not, and in the event that an article is to be handled as a poison the regulations and restrictions in the several States might be made reasonably uniform.

THE SANITATION OF IQUITOS, PERU.

By G. M. Converse, Acting Assistant Surgeon, United States Public Health Service, in charge of the sanitation of Iquitos.

A sanitary campaign for the improvement of the public health of Iquitos was begun in January, 1913, and continued until July 1, 1914.

The death records for the 10 years preceding 1913 show an average annual mortality rate of 40.56 per 1,000 inhabitants, increasing to an average of 46.58 for the last 3 years and to 49.52 for 1912.

During the first year of the work the death rate fell to 28.88, and during the first six months of 1914 to 21 per 1,000 inhabitants.

The birth rate for the five-year period preceding 1913 was 62.64 per 1,000 inhabitants per annum; for 1913 it was 64.

Description of Iquitos.

Iquitos is a Peruvian port for ocean-going vessels, 2,300 miles from the mouth of the Amazon River. It lies less than 4° south of the Equator, on a bank composed of clay and sand, facing a branch of the river about half a mile wide and separated from the main stream by a long and narrow island; it is otherwise hemmed in by swamps and impenetrable jungle.

The average temperature the year round is about 30° C. (86° F.), with high humidity, the rainfall during the first nine and a half months recorded being 2,349.11 mm. (93 inches). It rained on 182 days out of 305 days recorded.

The town has 12,754 inhabitants, mostly Indian. In lieu of a sewer system it has about 18 kilometers of open drains—a succession of mosquito-breeding pools. There is no public water supply. Its streets are unpaved; many of them are boggy and marshy; some are covered with a rank growth 3 to 4 feet high, others with both water and vegetation. It has no hospital and no public clinic.

The recorded death certificates show diagnoses of yellow fever, malaria, malarial cachexia, anemia, diarrhea, fevers, etc. More than one-half of all deaths are registered "of cause unknown," owing to the decedents not having been seen ante mortem by a physician.